

Ernesto Rosenstand and the Aruban Theatre

From the Indian past to a socially conscious present

by Wim Rutgers

Traditionally literature is classified in three genres, lyrics, epics and drama's. Theatre therefore as a matter of course is part of literature and the history of theatre is part of the history of literature. But when leafing through the synopses of Antillean literature like "Di Nos Autonoom" and "Met eigen stem" we soon notice that even though the authors may indeed believe that theatre belongs thereto — if only barely —, they deal with it rather superficially.

Cola Debrot in "Cultural Mozaïk" did not pay too much attention to the history of the theatre either. The "Encyclopedia of the Netherlands Antilles" is a happy exception, but for the rest theatre is treated in a rather stepmotherly fashion in our literary reviews. This is in fact surprising, because the genre enjoys a lively interest in the Netherlands Antilles, both in an active sense taking into account the considerable number of theatrical groups and players, and in a passive sense seeing the audiences who again and again provide full houses. A volume of poetry at best is bought by a couple of hundreds of people. A new play on the other hand will always attract a few thousands. In addition theatre seems to be one of the more democratic art forms, which not only the elite enjoy. The variety in repertory presented by the different groups ensures a very wide interest.

Whereas novels are mostly written in Curaçao, theatre takes place on all the islands. Each island has its own group, which was once more evident during the interinsular drama festival held in Aruba. Moreover international drama festivals were held in that island twice. Festivals for children's theatre, again in Aruba, enjoy high popularity both in the schools and in several community centre groups.

International

The Antillean theatre has often

had recourse to experts from outside the islands, by for example engaging directors through the Sticusa. Local professional directors such as Edsel Samson, Pacheco Domacassé and the Aruban Burny Every have also been active. What is offered by the theatre has a strongly international orientation through translations and adaptation of works belonging to world literature both from the past and the present. Molière, Shaw, Shakespeare, Sophocles, medieval legends and miracle-plays, as well as well-known Spanish works are translated into Papiamentu and presented.

According to Dr. J. Hartog theatre in Curaçao dates far back and existed even before the traditionary novels and poems. As early as 1821 a number of Jewish Curaçaoles formed a theatrical club "Liefhebberij Komédie", which brought plays in "Nederdeutsch" (Dutch)



Ernesto Rosenstand

and French. In 1830 there is supposed to have been a kind of playhouse, although it was not until 1871 that the well-known Teatro Naar opened its doors. In the nineteenth century mostly Spanish plays were produced, followed in the twentieth century by those in Dutch and Papiamentu.

Neglect

The theatre has no doubt contributed in no small measure to furthering the appreciation for the own mother tongue.

In his book Aruba Hartog mentions that the theatrical company "De Dietsche Speler" visited Aruba in 1933. Wagenaar criss-crossed the island with them as a guide, he continues, but he gives no information whatsoever on any of their performances. W. F. M. Lampe tells in "Buiten de Schaduw van de Gouverneur" that shortly after 1900 the teacher J. H. P. Schrills formed a theatrical club, consisting of pupils of the Julianaschool. His successor E. R. Goilo carried on this work under the name "Tooneelvereniging Prinses Juliana", which for a short period booked a lot of success. But he gives no details on the plays themselves. All these examples show that the theatre has been unjustifiably neglected in the framework of the history of literature. In this context more attention will have to be paid to it in the future.

Sparse

One of the persons who has for a long time been active in the theatre in Aruba is Ernesto E. Rosenstand. He was and still is involved as an actor, a translator and an author ♦

of original plays. He personifies part of the history of Aruban theatre and yet he is not mentioned in the "Schrijvers Prentenboek" nor in "Met eigen Stem". Jules de Palm writes in "De Antilliaanse literatuur op weg naar volwassenheid?": The Aruban theatrical group Mascaruba has made history on January 7, 1952, by presenting in Coro, Venezuela a play in Papiamentu called Macuarima written by Ernesto E. Rosenstand. A play, which just like the play Tula in Curaçao has an historical base. In the case of Macuarima this is the conquest of the Antilles by the Spaniards. In doing so he mentions only one of the many plays written by Rosenstand. The literary review "Watapana" does give a description of the visit to Venezuela, but the data on Rosenstand are sparse, reason why we had an interview with him on his theatrical work.

Beginning

Ernesto Rosenstand has been involved in the theatre in Aruba since the early fifties. When the first scholarship students returned from the Netherlands they started to stimulate the cultural awareness of the population via discussion groups and several other activities. One of the means employed was the theatre. Under the direction of Sim Frank they presented under the name "Centro Apostolico Arubano" the religious play "Bo Felicidad Ta Serka Mi", an adaptation by Rosenstand of the medieval "Beatrijs legend", as well as other mostly edifying drama's. A translation of Charles Dickens' "Christmas Carols" and Hubert Booi's "Golgotha" were produced towards the end of the fifties. The original play "Un Anochi di Pascu", written much later by Ernesto Rosenstand must also be seen in the context of this tradition.

Training

In Santa Cruz the "Grupo Artistico Di Santa Cruz", a group of female teachers working with the

nuns, were enthusiastically doing theatrical work. They used the production of plays, mainly of the lighter genre, to obtain funds for social-educational projects.

After this initial period we get the years when Dutch directors were sent to the Antilles to help build up theatrical activities. In the late fifties came Henk van Ulsen, who although stationed in Curaçao, was also active in Aruba. In that same period Jules de Palm worked here for the Department of Education. The St. Thomasbond of Catholic Teachers at that time took it upon itself to stage the medieval miracle-play "Mariken van Niemeghen" in a Papiamentu version called "Maria di Ser'i Noka". Later this play was presented in Curaçao as "Marie die Malpais", an adaptation by Raul Römer. A Dutch director who according to Rosenstand did a lot for the Aruban theatre was Piet Kamerman, who together with his wife Elly managed to direct four plays (two in Papiamentu, one in Dutch and one in English) and realise their production.

The theatrical group in which Rosenstand was also active called itself "Studio Comediantes". In 1961 the well-known group "Mascaruba" was formed. Peter Holland at that time was employed by the Cultural Centre Aruba (C.C.A.). For a good many years Ernesto worked as a performer and translator for this group. In the first play "Veneno Sabroso" he already had a small part. The last play he translated for Mascaruba was "No mata bo kurpa, ta primavera" in 1978. Rosenstand considers translating a trainingschool for mastering the art of play-writing.

Identity

Under Dolf de Vries' management Rosenstand's first original play was produced in the early seventies. This was the play "Macuarima", which portrayed how the Spanish arrived and proceeded to disrupt and destroy the indigenous Indian community.

Their thirst for gold and zeal to

disseminate the true creed went hand in hand. To this end the venerable Indian Macuarima had to be sacrificed together with his men. Rosenstand insists that the events that took place in Curaçao on and around May 30, 1969, were of influence on his development as an author. The crisis in which the country then found itself gave rise to a search for one's own identity. During these years he met Pacheco Domacassé in Curaçao. Just like the latter used the freedom-fighter Tula for conscientization of the Curaçao past, so Rosenstand fell back on the independent Indians for the Aruban past. The exchange that Rosenstand wanted to see realised with these two plays never took place, which is still regretted by Rosenstand. The original play performed at the occasion of the celebration of the fifteenth anniversary of Mascaruba, the musical "Wadirikiri", also shows an episode of the Indian past. The love Wadirikiri, Macuarima's daughter, feels for Pluma Blanco, who is from the mainland, is described in poetical language. Neither treason nor lies will ultimately stand in the way of this love. We find the poems written for this musical again in the volume "Un Anhelu Sin Fin", published by Rosenstand in 1982. In this connection we must also mention the play "Kibaima" by Hubert Booi, referred to before, because this play also is based on the Indian past.

These Aruban plays are closely related to the overall Caribbean trend of "Indigenism" or "Indianism", which glorifies the peaceful and cheerful Indian life, which was cruelly disrupted by the arrival of the Europeans. It describes in a romantic way their own past and the earliest ancestors. According to Rosenstand this is not done consciously, but is a result of our falling back on our own history to help solve the identity-crisis. The plays dealing with the Indian past have their origin in the stories written by Rosenstand for the children's programme of Radio Kelboom. Initially he used translations, ♦

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but later on he wrote original Aruban work. These have been collected in the well-known volume "Kuentanan Rubiano" and "Kuentanan pa un i tur".

Ancestry

Rosenstand tells us that he himself is a man of two cultures, which has given him more insight into this phenomenon. He was born and raised in Santa Martha, Colombia, in the same region as the famous author Gabriel Garcia Marquez, and where the United Fruit Company had its large plantations. His ancestors are Europeans from Germany and Denmark, while his father was a Cuban. This European-Spanish heritage is now blended with a life spent in the shadow of a large American multinational, where his father was employed as a maintenance man for the railroads. In this connection he mentions the strikes in the thirties, which were bloodily suppressed and in which "re-

volutionary" farmers were shot down in large numbers. These events are described in Marquez's "Cien años de soledad". They made Rosenstand very aware of social relations and abuse. This can be clearly seen in his original dramatic work, in which at a certain moment there is a clear turnabout.

The more poetical and romantic is replaced by social problems and commitment. This change is accompanied by a different view of the theatre, which Rosenstand wanted to see realised. When this proves to be impossible with the group Mascaruba, he decides to form the "Teatro Experimental Arubano". This takes place in 1978. With this group he has up to now produced three original and one translated play. During the second international drama festival in 1978 the one-acter "Alameda" was performed successfully. A year later he presented the play "Pa nan por ta Nan" at the interinsular Antillean theatre festival. After the

translation of Enrique Buenaventura's "Na man drechi di Dios Tata" came the first full length original play "Kiko ta di nos?" (May 1983).

Orientation

In these works the theme is socially oriented. A lot of attention is paid to human beings and the dregs of humanity, like drunks and prostitutes, the feeble-minded and poverty. His sympathy lies with the underdog, who is defended against the members of the respectable bourgeoisie, which is very quickly inclined to condemn and never makes an attempt to find out what it is in society that causes people to derail.

The form the play will finally take is arrived at in consultation with the players of the group. The group, consisting of about twenty members, discusses in its totality the theme of a new play and works out several parts in an improvisatory way. Rosen-

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stand's task as an author is to register and advise until a definitive text is ready after consultation and democratic voting procedures. Only then is the play presented.

Besides theatre for adults Rosenstand writes for the children's acting club "Chi cu Cha". Here also he attempts to work in the same manner.

In this way Ernesto Rosenstand tries to give his translations and original work a proper form for the Aruban theatre.

In doing so he is not isolated, for on study trips to Colombia and Belgium he has oriented himself about this modern experimental and improvisationary form of theatre. One of his ideals is a proper form of theatre linked to the international theatrical trends. He is aware of the fact that he has to work with amateurs, because professional theatre for the time being is out of the question.

A new initiative of his is to publish the plays so that they will not be lost, but preserved after the performance. If this had been done before a large part of our theatrical history would have been a lot easier to recover than it is now. ■

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